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House of Representatives

HON. STEVE ISRAEL
OF NEW YORK

Mr. ISRAEL. Mr. Chairman, I rise today in strong opposition to H.R. 2210, the School Readiness Act of 2003.

Head Start is one of the great success stories in the history of American education. Since 1965, Head Start has benefited more than 20 million low-income pre-school children, preparing them to compete with their more affluent peers when they reach primary school.

Head Start offers these kids a research-based academic curriculum and a wide range of vital services, including health screenings, nutrition, dental and vision services, as well as extensive parental involvement in education. It currently serves over 900,000 pre-schoolers, including 2,500 on Long Island.

Last week, I had the privilege of meeting several Head Start success stories in my district. Let me tell you about one of them.

Thomas Farrell attended Head Start for 2 years as a pre-schooler. Thomas came into Head Start with a speech impediment, which the Head Start educators worked to correct.

Now, Thomas has just finished his first year at Brown University. He has excelled in his coursework. He plays linebacker on the football team. And he speaks perfectly.

From Head Start to the Ivy League. That's the kind of life-changing difference that Head Start makes.

But this bill will pull the rug out from under all of the future Thomas Farrells out there--ending Head Start as we know it. H.R. 2210 dismantles Head Start, turning the program over to States with unproven expertise and without the Federal program's quality standards and oversight.

It this bill passes, our low-income kids will be placed into State-run Head Start programs, which will be held to a weaker set of quality standards--if they are held to any standards at all--than current, locally run Head Start programs.

States will be able to cut off all services to 3-year-olds, increase class size, eliminate adult literacy services, eliminate parent classroom involvement, and use unproven and untested academic curricula.

And under this bill, States will be able to raid Head Start funding to pay for other educational programs.

My Republican colleagues say they want to make Head Start better. But under this bill, States are under no obligation to show that they would improve the program. In fact, no State pre-kindergarten program has ever been demonstrated to be as effective as Head Start.

Mr. Chairman, my Democratic colleagues and I are willing to work with our friends across the aisle to make Head Start an even more effective program for our low-income kids. We can start by fully funding Head Start so no eligible child is left behind. We can work together to expand Early Head Start to serve more infants and toddlers. And we can improve the quality of Head Start teachers by requiring that more of them have bachelor degrees and by compensating them properly so that they stay with Head Start.

But what we must not do is dismantle a program that has proven to be so effective for our low-income kids.

Mr. Chairman, education is the great equalizer for kids like Thomas Farrell to achieve the American Dream. I implore my colleagues to vote against H.R. 2210, which makes the playing field even more unlevel for them.

Our primary job in Congress is to set priorities for America. Let our children be our highest priority.